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ABSTRACT

Prewriting, writing, and revision represent vital elements in both the total writing experience and the evaluation of writing programs. An effective writing program should include (1) a written plan to guide composition instructors and ensure that students receive balanced instruction; (2) clearly stated purposes reflecting concern for composition as both self-expression and communication; (3) an environment conducive to writing, containing bulletin boards, literature, and pictures to stimulate ideas; (4) composition instruction in which the writing process is taught and used, and in which the writer imagines the audience, sets goals, develops ideas, produces drafts and revised texts, and edits; (5) instruction in penmanship, spelling, grammar, and mechanics--the components vital to the final stages of the composing process; (6) instruction in different types of compositions (essays, summaries, poems, and letters) for various purposes (to express, inform, persuade, or clarify); (7) an appreciation of the value of writing for communication purposes, shown through sharing; (8) demonstration of the writing process--teachers writing with students; (9) opportunities for students to compose across the curriculum to strengthen and enhance thinking in the content areas; and (10) evaluation to encourage student growth, including teacher/student conferences. (This list is the product of a graduate course on the evaluation of language arts programs. The process through which the class developed the above criteria is briefly described.) (JD)

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# CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING WRITING PROGRAMS

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## CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING WRITING PROGRAMS

What constitutes a good writing program? How can we approach the evaluation of a writing program? These two questions formed the basis for part of the content of a graduate course on Evaluation of Programs of Language Arts. After searching the literature, we discovered that more has been written on evaluating composition than on evaluating programs as a whole. We accepted the task of formulating criteria, believing this to be the first step in the process of evaluating a program. This article describes the way we went about the task and the results of our work.

In the process of setting up the criteria we exchanged viewpoints and supported our ideas either from literature, interviews with other teachers and administrators,or from personal experience in the classroom. After we agreed on the criteria, each of us accepted responsibility for synthesizing information and writing a rationale to support one criterion. These written statements were then shared with the class.

We wrote, discussed, and revised as we worked together to achieve clarity in statements. This lively and provocative self- and peer-evaluation procedure became a source of growth for us, both as individuals and as a group.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of our experience was the interaction with and criticism of our peers. We learned to communicate with one another and to share ideas. It was a give and take situation. Each of us was encouraged to separate personal feelings from our writing and

to use suggestions to express thoughts more clearly.

During the class project there emerged an awareness that we were immersed in the total writing experience. Pre-writing, writing, and revision were vital parts of the development of the criteria and rationales. The process also afforded us a concrete base upon which to test the ideas included in the following document.

## Evaluating Writing Programs

Writing, in its broadest sense, constitutes a major part of the language arts program. As one of the expressive arts, it includes skills and processes used in transforming thoughts into words and expressing thoughts in written form. These skills and processes include penmanship, spelling, mechanics, grammar, and composition. Instruction provided in each part of the writing portion of the language arts program should have as its major purpose that of helping individuals express themselves effectively in writing.

Historically, in the elementary school, more attention has been given to the skills of penmanship, spelling, and mechanics and less to instruction in composing. The emphasis on skills, if not placed in the context of written composition, can lead to isolated work that militates against transfer to the actual act of writing. There is need for planned instruction in the skill areas and many opportunities for meaningful practice. Additionally and most important, there is need for instruction in the process of composing.

The individual needs stimulation for thinking which actually precedes the writing. This stimulation can come in many ways: experience and subsequent discussion, exploration of some object, discussion of a literary

work, or perhaps thought provoking questions posed by the teacher. This pre-writing experience, often overlooked, is vital to the thinking which then finds expression in writing.

Sufficient time must be allotted for the actual writing, a premium being placed on getting the thoughts on paper at the expense, if necessary, of correctness of expression. The flow of ideas is the most important consideration at this time. This is followed by a time for revisions where the individual considers his/her own and others' criticism for improving the composition.

Revision, often viewed by the individual as punitive, is vital to composing. The individual's view of this part of composing has perhaps been shaped by practice that equates revision with re-copying rather than with re-thinking. Selective revision (rather than revising all written work), conferences with teachers, reactions from peers, comparison of first drafts with improved compositions, and teachers sharing revision of their own compositions are a few practices which might help to change the students' attitude toward revising and assist them in making revision a useful part of their experience in writing. In this final stage, thinking and re-thinking converge with skills of spelling, mechanics, and penmanship in the completion of a particular composition.

Criteria

1. There is evidence of a planned writing program.

A written plan for a writing program within the school (or system) is available to guide teachers in their teaching of composition. The plan will ensure that students receive a balanced composition program and at the same time leave room for spontaneity and flexibility to accommodate differences in teachers' special strengths. The writing

program is developed in such a way that students are encouraged to improve their present writing skills as well as be introduced to new areas of composition that are appropriate for their developmental and grade levels.

2. Clearly stated purposes reflect concern for composition as both a form of self-expression and a way of communicating thoughts to others.

Composition provides a means for students to express themselves as they explore their thoughts. As a form of self-expression, the act of writing helps students organize thoughts and ideas as they write and revise. Self-expression involves composition for private purposes as well as communication with others. Examples of composition for private purposes include individual writing folders, journals, logs, and diaries. Communication of ideas among individuals provides the connection for understanding and growth. Opportunities for sharing written work with peers, teachers, parents, and the community include self-made books, displays of compositions, and publication through the media of the school and community.

3. There is an environment conducive to writing.

The school and classroom environments are powerful forces in helping students develop writing competence. When given ample time to write, students can be motivated more readily; additionally, the environment can provide support that makes writing a satisfying experience. A classroom that has a supportive and expectant atmosphere can encourage students to write without fear of criticism and humiliation. A good writing environment provides stimulation through bulletin boards, literature, and pictures. Writing supplies and reference materials such as dictionaries, thesauruses, word lists, mechanics charts,and proofreading checklists facilitate careful work and should be available to the students.

4. The writing process is taught and used.

The art of writing is learned through a process in which the writer imagines the audience; sets goals; develops ideas; produces notes, drafts, and revised texts; and edits to meet the expectations of the audience. Teachers must provide opportunities for students to write frequently and encourage them to make full use of the components that comprise the process of writing.

5. Penmanship, spelling, grammar, and mechanics are taught as a part of the composition program.

Each of these conventions is vital to the final stages of the composing process. They are the means by which the writer is able to communicate with his/her audience. These conventions will primarily be taught in conjunction with the composing process, although it will be necessary from time to time to teach them independently and relate them to composition. Students will be aware of the importance of these conventions and encouraged to use them in the final stages of composition for effective communication with the audience.

6. Students write different types of compositions for varied purposes and audiences.

In order to communicate effectively through writing, students must be taught to write various types of compositions, such as essays, notes, summaries, poems, letters, stories, reports, scripts, and journals. Since these types of compositions have various purposes, students must be given instruction on how to write to inform, to persuade, to express self, to explore, and to clarify thinking. Since these types of compositions are produced for different audiences as well, the students must be taught to write for self, classmates, the teacher, and the community.

7. The value of writing is shown through sharing.

While composition may be appreciated on a personal level for self-expression alone, sharing student selected work provides an observable basis that writing is valued for purposes of communication. Evidence of sharing may be observed through student-teacher or peer conferences, books compiled by the student or class, displays of compositions in the school, and publication in school and community media.

8. Teachers write with students.

Teachers who write with students demonstrate the composing process as well as a commitment to the writing program. Through writing, teachers strengthen personal writing skills, thereby increasing their effectiveness as teachers of the composing process. By sharing writing, teachers provide evidence of the difficulties as well as the satisfaction found in writing.

9. Students have opportunities to compose in all content areas.

The composing process extended to all curriculum areas strengthens and enhances thinking in these areas. Writing critiques, reports, journals, and logs in the areas of social studies, health, science, and physical education and describing problem solving in mathematics encourage students to clarify and communicate their thinking in areas outside language arts. Composition is a vital and integrative part of all content areas and an important means of communication.

10. There is evidence that evaluation encourages student growth.

Student growth is encouraged by a program which includes an on-going system of evaluation. One-to-one conferences between teacher and writer and allowing the student to select material to be evaluated contribute to improvements in writing. When students know and understand

the established system of evaluation and are taught how to evaluate their own work and that of their peers, they can use the information to make improvements in their writing.

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